

**Prepared Remarks for  
VADM Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., US Navy (Retired)  
At White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation  
August 31, 2005**

Good morning everyone, and thank you for being here.

Let me begin by conveying to all of you Secretary Gutierrez's sincere regrets that he could not join you today. President Bush asked the Secretary to take part in the Hurricane Katrina Reconstruction Task Force. So, the Secretary's duties prevented him from traveling to St. Louis.

This Conference marks a new opportunity to collaborate on preserving our natural resources for future generations. It's a priority issue for President Bush. It's a priority issue for this Administration.

Our goal is to broaden private-public partnerships that will enhance our environment. For the Department of Commerce, this conference is an opportunity to build on a century-old tradition. In 1903, the Fisheries Commission and fisheries conservation became a component of the newly created agency.

More recently, NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has created a number of partnerships to foster cooperative conservation. Among these are programs on climate research, coral reefs and fisheries habitat restoration.

The NOAA Community-Based Restoration Program has been an amazing success story. Over the past five years, 16,000 habitat acres have been restored. Eighty stream blockages were removed. And 700 stream miles for fish passage were opened. To accomplish these milestones, the Restoration Program has worked cooperatively with local, state and private partners. We leveraged both financial and volunteer resources.

Today, I'd like to talk to you about an important new partnership proposal - it's the Open Rivers initiative. This is a cooperative program to remove obsolete barriers to free flowing rivers and fish passage.

Let me be specific. I'm talking primarily about dams that are in hazardous condition or no longer useful. I'm also talking about other barriers such as culverts that because of size and location are too frequently blocked. Most important, I'm talking about removing obstructions where the community is leading the charge.

Removal of such barriers can be an especially costly undertaking for local governments and private owners. In fact, there are dozens of dams around the country that have already completed the environmental review and permitting process. The communities recognize the benefits of removing these obsolete obstructions, but they don't have the resources to make it happen.

Our new initiative is intended to help provide assistance where this is the case. The key to the successful implementation of this program is a consensus among the people and communities affected. The impetus will come from the ground up.

Dams are a vital part of our national infrastructure. They are a critical source of economic, environmental and social benefits. The National Research Council estimates the total number of U.S. dams at 2.5 million. The vast majority are still valuable and functional.

And I want to say this as clearly as possible:

- First, we have no interest in pursuing removal of any dam that serves a useful purpose.
- Second, we have no interest in pursuing removal of any dam whose owner is not a willing partner.

The main reasons for dam removal are safety, environmental or economics. Often, it's all three.

Many dams are 50 years, 100 years, or older. Some of these are small dams, less than 6-feet tall. They were built for a variety of reasons: Many of them to establish recreation areas, some to create fire and farm ponds. Others for flood control, or irrigation, or water or energy supply. A number served multiple purposes.

But that was then. Today, for many, their original reason for being no longer applies. Some of these aging structures have high-hazard potential for anyone working or living nearby. Recent technology has reduced fatalities, but significant liability remains for dam owners.

Our initiative is intended for those projects where the community reaches a consensus. The motivation may be safety and/or to boost local economies. Removal can increase real estate values and recreational opportunities.

In addition to obsolete dams, there are other barriers to free flowing rivers. Our Open Rivers initiative is also aimed at these. For example, the sheer number of sewers or drains under roads, dikes, or other structures means access is closed to many miles of streams.

At the Commerce Department, we see removal of obsolete dams and other barriers as an additional tool in conserving and restoring our fish populations. It would especially benefit fish such as salmon, striped bass, and shad whose life cycle carries them through the river and the ocean.

Overall, we envision the new initiative as a partnership in cooperative conservation and an investment in our society, our economy and our ecological future. From reports we have seen, it's an investment that can produce real returns.

One of the restoration projects that we participated in was in Newport, Maine. Working with the State of Maine and the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Commerce, Town Manager Jim Ricker led the effort to remove an obsolete dam.

He wanted to improve the safety of the people and the town. He wanted to reduce maintenance costs. And he wanted to increase available green space.

The removal of the Guilford Dam eliminated a potential safety hazard. It also restored a portion of the Sebasticook River.

This is leading to the renewal of the waterfront area, including increased fish populations, higher real estate values and more recreational areas for the community.

Jim has agreed to share his experience with us here today.

Jim, if you would please join me at the podium ... Ladies and Gentlemen, Newport, Maine, Town Manager Jim Ricker ...